



If the main thing is making sure the main thing remains the main thing, then try the Strategic Blueprint process

BLUE AND BLACK

the hardest thing in business is to keep focused—or, as we used to say at College Pro Painters, to “keep your eyes on your fries.” There are hundreds of day-to-day distractions that can take you away from your goal.

At a recent marketing conference, I saw a sign on a white board that read: “The main thing is to make sure that the main thing remains the main thing.” Like all such cute sayings, it is too cute by half. The half that’s missing is deciding what the main thing that you want to stay focused on actually is. But the other trick is staying focused on that main thing, and after years of running businesses and investing in and advising others, I have discovered a very powerful technique for doing so. It’s called the Strategic Blueprint, and it was developed by one of the companies that I advise, Fusion Learning Inc. We use it there, and I have used it at the charity of which I am chair, the Toronto Christian Resource Centre in Regent Park. It passes my most important test: it works.

It’s based on the maxim “Keep it simple.” When I was a packaged-goods marketing rookie at General Foods, the marketing plans we most revered were those of Procter & Gamble. They were famous for being concise—four pages, max. (Ours took up several binders.) Focus means making choices. Finite space forces those choices.

Fusion’s Strategic Blueprint does the same thing. Here’s what it looks like: At the top of a page, you list your mission, vision and values. Then, you’re forced to make choices. There is space for only four or five key strategies that must be executed to achieve the vision. Finally, there’s room for one “bull’s-eye target” for each of the strategies, as well as for three leading indicators (or tactical “stair steps”) to meet each bull’s-eye target within three years.

There’s nothing magical in that, perhaps. The magic comes in filling in this page—which takes two or three days—and in the daily, weekly and monthly grind of executing it over the next 1,095 days.

At the implementation stage, we add a “special sauce” composed of two parts:

PART 1: Individual Accountability: At Fusion, the managing partner owns the one-page document, while each one of the bull’s-eye targets and leading indicators is owned by one member of the management team. Even if they do not have full control of all the resources needed to drive the result, they at least take primary responsibility to report on the progress of their spe-

cific targets and stair steps, and to flag concerns. This greatly alleviates the problem of “management by committee.”

PART 2: Quarterly “Hamburger Meetings” with the senior management team and the advisory board (if you have one): These are held within 15 days of the end of a quarter and limited to a very focused four hours. The upper “bun” of the meeting is one hour of review. Each management-team member reports on the progress in the past quarter in attaining the stair steps for which they were responsible. The only two ratings permitted are “Hit” and “Miss”; this works wonders because no one wants an X beside their objective when the next meeting rolls around. At Fusion, the team also takes its top two quarterly goals and embeds them into the set of goals they discuss regularly with their supervisors and that count toward their bonus. This helps focus attention.

The “meat” in the middle is the discussion of key issues that might prevent a goal from being attained. Prior to the meeting, the meeting chair works with all the players to identify these issues and prepare a discussion document that includes a clear, desired outcome. The desired outcome can range from easy (share information and discuss) through somewhat difficult (problem-solve and develop options) to very tough (make a decision). Sadly, most meeting planners do not make these distinctions and put too many issues on the agenda. Inevitably, everyone leaves with the feeling of having “stirred the pot” without deciding anything, or of deciding too quickly.

The lower bun is the revised goal-setting for the next quarter. At Fusion, everyone takes half an hour to reflect on what they have learned from the meeting and to write their top three goals for the next quarter on flip charts on the wall. This way, everyone can see everyone else’s goals in real time. We then spend the last half-hour ensuring we agree that these individual goals are the best use of senior management’s time to maximize vision attainment.

The hamburger meeting is, in fact, a microcosm of the classic business feedback model: set a goal, execute your plan, review progress and problem-solve on key issues that arise.

All businesses have finite resources; what you do with them makes the difference. Budgets allocate money; goals allocate time. Make good use of these four hours and you’ll significantly increase the chance that you’ll be keeping the main thing in your business the main thing—and consistently land in the black. After all, that’s the main thing, isn’t it? **P**

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